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**Uxbridge Bernat Mill Fire Caused By Welding**

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan, Uxbridge Fire Chief Peter Ostroskey and Uxbridge Police Chief Scott J. Freitas announced their joint investigation into the cause and origin of the July 21, 2007 fire at the Bernat Mill in Uxbridge. They have determined the most probable cause was welding. Town Manager Jill Myers, who moderated the press conference at Uxbridge Fire Headquarters, joined them.

**Code Compliance and Enforcement Issues**

In addition to investigating the cause of the fire, the Code Compliance and Enforcement Unit of the Office of the State Fire Marshal conducted a complementary but separate investigation into why there was such extensive damage and destruction in a sprinklered building,

**Key Findings**

The welding was being performed in an environment that did not meet the safety requirements of the fire and building codes, and for which no permit had been obtained from the fire department. In addition, the part of the sprinkler system in the area of origin had been padlocked in the closed position without notification to the fire department. This allowed the fire to quickly overwhelm the sprinkler system.

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan said, "One of the key recommendations from our investigation is the importance for developers, realtors, community planning agencies and fire and building officials to require *Article 34 Reviews* under the State Building Code." He added, "Converting our old mill buildings to modern productive uses is key to economic growth. These evaluations and analyses of the buildings' structure and systems will help protect that investment by developers and the community in these buildings as well as public safety."

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Town Manager Jill Myers said, “We are continuing to refine and develop new practices to ensure a coordinated permit review, due in part to a recent State 43D Expedited Permitting Grant which will provide the necessary technology for 24/7 information access and tracking. Staff from our Office of Planning and Economic Development, along with the fire chief and myself will also be working closely with the business community to help ensure that proper permits and licenses have been obtained, and that critical systems like fire alarms and sprinklers are being maintained regularly by properly licensed trades people.” She added, “While the responsibility lies with the building or company manager, we are here and very willing to provide any assistance to make sure the economic vitality, the public’s safety and the very character of our town are protected.”

Uxbridge Fire Chief Peter Ostroskey said, “If the sprinkler system had been properly maintained and operational, the fire would have been controlled and contained until the fire department arrived.” He added, “A permit is required to shut off any part of a sprinkler system just to avoid this type of scenario where the fire quickly overwhelmed the functioning part of the sprinkler system.”

Uxbridge Police Chief Scott Freitas said, “I would like to commend the investigative team for their rigorous, thorough investigation that involved seamless team work.” He added, “This was a large-scale fire investigation that involved the cooperation of many parties over a long period of time. Although I hope and pray we will never have to do it again, the police department remains committed to additional cooperative efforts of staff and facilities if a situation like this one is encountered again.”

### **Fire Investigation**

Investigators conducted hundreds of interviews and re-interviews, performed and documented exhaustive scene reconstruction and reviewed all available evidence. Consideration was given to other potential ignition scenarios including arson, electrical and equipment malfunction as well as chemical causes. No evidence was found of an electrical malfunction as an ignition source. Investigators identified chemicals stored throughout the building and found no evidence that they were involved in the ignition of the fire. No evidence of a vapor explosion or of a spontaneous heating event was found. Due to the catastrophic damage to the mill and the fact that the building was poorly secured, an intentionally set fire cannot be conclusively eliminated. Nevertheless, the available evidence does not support an ignition scenario of an intentionally set fire. For example, there was no evidence of ignitable liquids causing the fire.

### **Evidence Supports Welding as Most Probable Cause**

Welding was being conducted regularly by East Coast Machine in an environment that did not meet the safety requirements of the fire and building codes and for which no permit had been obtained from the fire department. Welding had caused small fires in the past that had been extinguished by staff, and welding had taken place in the area of origin during the workday prior to start of the fire.

Unprotected Class A combustibles, such as paper, cardboard, and wood, were in the area of origin which had no protective shields and the combustible materials were less than 35 feet from where the welding took place. A spark could have landed anywhere and started a smoldering fire. Investigators believe the fire smoldered undetected for many hours before there was any visible sign of the fire. The fire code requires someone to stay in the area of welding for at least 30 minutes after welding is concluded as a fire precaution and that did not occur on July 20, 2007.

An employee reported smelling smoke after welding had concluded on July 20, 2007 in the hall near East Cost Machine but did not locate any source or cause for concern.

The cause and origin of the fire was jointly investigated by members of the Uxbridge Fire Department, the Uxbridge Police Department, State Police assigned to the Office of the State Fire Marshal and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Assistance was received from the State Police Air Wing, Accident Reconstruction Section Crime Scene Services and the Crime Lab.

#### **Non-Criminal Citations for Code Violations**

On behalf of the Uxbridge Fire Department, the Department of Fire Services has issued several non-criminal citations and notices of violation.

East Coast Machine received a non-criminal citation for three code violations related to welding with a fine of \$100 each. Capron Corp. as the building's owner, and thus the party ultimately responsible, received a non-criminal citation with a fine of \$100 for failure to maintain the sprinkler system.

A notice of violation for failure to obtain a permit to store combustible liquids from the fire department was issued to Prime Materials. A notice of violation for failure to obtain a permit to store flammable liquids from the fire department was issued to Flanagan Interiors.

The Department of Fire Services will refer the matter of unlicensed personnel conducting sprinkler work to the Department of Public Safety.

Both the final fire investigation report and the code compliance reports will be available for public request soon.